

# Decolonising Knowledge: A Euro-Mediterranean Perspective

by Lorenzo Kamel

How can we decolonise Euro-Mediterranean relations? From a historical perspective, one of the most persuasive, indirect answers to this question was provided by Nicholas B. Dirks: "in certain important ways", he wrote, "knowledge was what colonialism was all about".<sup>1</sup> There is indeed little chance to decolonise Euro-Mediterranean relations without first questioning the "colonial echoes" rooted in the process of simplification which, particularly in the last few decades, has often reduced much of the

history of the "Southern Mediterranean others"<sup>2</sup> to a Eurocentric and mono-dimensional narrative.

The analysis firstly focuses on a particularly meaningful example along these lines, shedding light on the largely successful attempt to detach ancient Greece's legacy from its Mediterranean and "oriental" background,<sup>3</sup> with all the "entanglements" that this issue

<sup>1</sup> Foreword by Nicholas B. Dirks in Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge. The British in India*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996, p. ix. Dabashi noted that "The anthropologist's pen was, and remains, mightier than the colonial officer's sword". Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring. The End of Postcolonialism*, New York, Zed Books, 2012, p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> Daniela Huber, Asma Nouira and Maria Cristina Paciello, "The Mediterranean: A Space of Division, Disparity and Separation", in *Medreset Policy Papers*, No. 3 (November 2018), p. 10, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/9668>.

<sup>3</sup> According to Park, "The East is not the West because the East lacks what is essentially Western: the 'principle of individual freedom,' which is dominant in the 'Greek element'". Peter K.J. Park, *Africa, Asia, and the History of Philosophy. Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canon, 1780-1830*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2013, p. 126.

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*This paper is published in the framework of an ongoing project entitled "Engaging the Past for a Shared Future. Decolonising Euro-Mediterranean Relations", run by IAI's Middle East and Mediterranean Programme with the support of the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation and in collaboration with the History and Political Science departments at the University of Turin. Views contained in the article are of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of other project partners and sponsors.*

has on a number of cultural, political and religious-related aspects and narratives. Secondly, it critically examines the thesis that posits the existence of a "Judeo-Christian tradition", a claim which, aside from fostering mental, religious and cultural cleavages, also plays a key role in undermining the possibility of shaping a more balanced Euro-Mediterranean set of relationships. Finally, the analysis moves to address the necessity of encouraging a process of "unlearning", revisiting the way history, and particularly Euro-Mediterranean connections and relations, continues to be (often) taught and learnt.

### *Whose democracy?*

In what is now Lebanon, the Phoenicians "had something comparable to the self-regulating city-state or polis" and there is archaeological and historical evidence to claim that the origins of some of the "Greek political arrangements we most admire" are to be traced to the Phoenicians.<sup>4</sup> The Tell el-'Amarna Letters, whose corpus consists of 382 tablets inscribed in cuneiform characters in around the 14th century BCE, document the existence of Phoenician towns "ruled, at least from time to time, by deliberative forums of a broad cross-section of the citizens".<sup>5</sup> Tyre, on the coast of current-

day Lebanon, was a republic headed by elective magistrates in the 6th century BCE.<sup>6</sup> According to Stephen Stockwell, the Phoenicians maintained what we today would consider a "proto-democracy":

The Phoenicians brought more than just trade into the Greek sphere and they could have quite possibly had a formative influence on Greek political institutions that resulted in democratic configurations equivalent to Kleisthenes's reforms. Athenian democracy was a complex set of interlocking institutions with regular meetings. There is some evidence that at least Byblos, Sidon, Tyre, Sparta and Chios can match this formulation.<sup>7</sup>

These and many other possible examples are not intended to suggest that the Phoenicians, Carthaginians (who, according to Greek historian Polybius, achieved higher "proto-democratic standards" than the Romans) and other peoples and cultures "invented" democracy. Rather, they suggest that the practices and principles underlying democracy are the result of a process of accumulation too often ignored in the name of an imagined "Jerusalem-Athens-Rome" centred view of history which in many

<sup>4</sup> Simon Hornblower, "Creation and Development of Democratic Institutions in Ancient Greece", in John Dunn (ed.), *Democracy. The Unfinished Journey, 508 BC to AD 1993*, Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Stockwell, "Before Athens: Early Popular Government in Phoenician and Greek City States", in *Geopolitics, History, and International Relations*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2010), p. 127, <http://hdl.handle.net/10072/37713>.

<sup>6</sup> Sandro Filippo Bondi, "Political and Administrative Organization", in Sabatino Moscati (ed.), *The Phoenicians*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2001, p. 153.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Stockwell, "Before Athens", cit., p. 133. Regarding these topics, see Benjamin Isakhan and Stephen Stockwell (eds), *The Edinburgh Companion to the History of Democracy. From Pre-history to Future Possibilities*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2012.

ways conceals more than it reveals.

The issue of ancient Greece's "oriental" legacy fits into this analysis as well. To cite Ellen Meiksins Wood (1942–2016), "it is even more artificial to detach ancient Greece from, say, Egypt or Persia, as if the Greeks were always 'European', living a separate history, and not part of a larger Mediterranean and 'Eastern' world".<sup>8</sup> Think also of symbols such as the myrtle dedicated to the Goddess Aphrodite and Athena's olive tree, both borrowed from the traditions of ancient Egypt.

In other words, scholars who link Europe's roots to Ancient Greece, and thus to many of the previously mentioned concepts and ideas, are simply (more or less consciously) recognising Europe's oriental connections (in Greek mythology, Europe is the name of the daughter of Agenor's, king of Tyre, in modern-day Lebanon), dominant religion (Christianity was an Oriental religion) and philosophical roots.

The term φιλόσοφος (*philosophos*) itself, "lover of wisdom", is drawn from the Egyptian mer-rekh (mr-rh), "lover of knowledge". The most ancient philosophical texts originate precisely from Egypt, beginning with the papyrus on the "Immortality of writers", (re) discovered in the 1920s and dated 1200 BCE.<sup>9</sup> As noted by John M. Hobson:

<sup>8</sup> Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Citizens to Lord: A Social History of Western Political Thought from Antiquity to the Late Middle Ages*, London/New York, Verso, 2011, p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> For a translation of the papyrus in English, see Toby Wilkinson, *Writings from Ancient Egypt*, London, Penguin, 2016.

Eurocentric scholars assume that the rise of capitalist modernity was pioneered solely by the Europeans without any help from the Easterners. [...] Deconstructing Eurocentrism [...] enables us to reveal the European West as a *hybrid* entity that has been shaped by the East [...]. Today we take it as axiomatic that Greece was the birthplace of Europe. For it was there where science and rational thinking were allegedly first established, only to be reclaimed after the Dark Age interlude during the so-called Italian Renaissance. But this notion of Greece is a fabrication – an idea that was constructed by European thinkers only as late as the end of the eighteenth century [...]. Greece was linked spiritually and culturally to the East [...]. Moreover, that Ancient Greece owes so much to ancient Egypt (as the Greeks readily acknowledged), wreaks havoc with the notion of a pure Aryan lineage of Europe that is cherished by Eurocentric thinkers.<sup>10</sup>

### *The making of a "Judeo-Christian tradition"*

Another key aspect directly connected to the debates on democracy, and with wide repercussions on Euro-Mediterranean relations, is caught up with the misleading yet frequently cited perception of a "Judeo-Christian tradition". Still today, plenty of scholars

<sup>10</sup> John M. Hobson, "Revealing the Cosmopolitan Side of Oriental Europe: The Eastern Origins of European Civilisation", in Gerard Delanty (ed.), *Europe and Asia beyond East and West*, London/New York, Routledge, 2006, p. 109-110.

habitually refer to this supposed tradition as “the cradle of principles of equality and justice”,<sup>11</sup> while others focus on “democracy’s biblical roots”<sup>12</sup> and, more generally, the role of Biblical texts in fostering secular political power and its desacralisation. In this case as well, however, such assumptions reflect limited, simplistic and frequently anachronistic perspectives.

Indeed, Atheism, as well as some principles related to secularism, were introduced into Indian traditions long before being introduced in Europe.<sup>13</sup> Even more important within the frame of this article is the fact that, in the words of US Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, “‘Judeo-Christian’ [...] a) positions Jews & Christians against Muslims, is Islamophobic, b) elides Christian oppression & murder of Jews over more than 1000 years, & c) ignores Jewish civilization worldwide & facts of key Jewish developments in Middle East & N[orth] Africa”,<sup>14</sup> as well as North America and other contexts.

<sup>11</sup> Giuliano Amato e Carlo Cardia, “Carta dei valori della cittadinanza e dell’integrazione”, in Carlo Cardia e Giuseppe Dalla Torre (eds), *Comunità islamiche in Italia. Identità e forme giuridiche*, Turin, Giappichelli, 2015, p. 597.

<sup>12</sup> Mordecai Roshwald, “The Biblical Roots of Democracy”, in *Diogenes*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (November 2006), p. 139-151.

<sup>13</sup> See Ramkrishna Bhattacharya, *More Studies on the Cārvāka/Lokāyata*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Tweet by Danya Ruttenberg, 27 January 2019, <https://twitter.com/theradr/status/108958999920660484>. For a more thoroughgoing analysis, see Jacob Neusner and Tamara Sonn, *Comparing Religions through Law. Judaism and Islam*, London/New York, Routledge, 1999.

The earliest communications between Europeans and native American peoples were, for that matter, in “the language of Islam”: when Christopher Columbus’s (1451–1506) interpreter, Luí de Torres (?–1493), a Spanish Jew, approached the indigenous peoples of Taínos (“friendly people”), he did so in Arabic.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to being misleading, the widespread tendency to refer to a “Judeo-Christian tradition” risks accentuating dangerous antagonisms and watershed phenomena at the expense of a greater understanding of the shared historical legacy underlying the three largest mono-theistic religions. A powerful confirmation of this fact can be seen in the Epic of Gilgamesh (c. 2100), a literary product of ancient Mesopotamia, the cradle of Sumerians, to whom we owe, among many other inventions, cheques, letters of credit and interest payments on loans. The Epic contains many of the themes – including the myth of the “universal flood”, Noah’s Ark and the Garden of Eden – that were later included in the Bible and other religious texts.

What has just been argued applies to many other related issues as well. Think, for instance, of the literary parallelisms of the Song of Songs, that is, compositions of similar topics that existed previously in ancient Egyptian

<sup>15</sup> When Columbus landed on 12 October 1492 on one of the islands of the modern Bahamas he believed he had reached the Indies, and he persisted in this belief until his death. The continent had been inhabited by indigenous peoples – who clearly did not understand Arabic – for thousands of years and was “discovered” many centuries before Columbus by Vikings, Scandinavians and other peoples.



and Sumerian literature: “The love song genre”, as noted by Michael V. Fox, “certainly underwent many changes between its presumed Egyptian origins and the time when it reached Palestine, took root in Hebrew literature, grew in native forms, and blossomed as the song of songs”.<sup>16</sup> To remain in the field of literature, it should be noted that 14th-century BCE Mesopotamia was the birthplace of the first poetess in history: the Sumerian priestess Enheduanna.<sup>17</sup>

A further significant example can be found in the “holy city” *par excellence*, Jerusalem. As noted in a study published by the University of Bar-Ilan, “Canaanite Jerusalem had two holy sites; both were above and outside the city walls. Shalem was probably worshipped in the area of the Temple Mount, which later became the holiest site for the Jews and the third most holy site for Moslems”.<sup>18</sup> The idea of the rosary itself was borrowed from Muslims in Spain, who were inspired by the prayer beads Buddhists used in Central Asia, who in turn borrowed the idea from Brahmans in Hindu India.

<sup>16</sup> See Michael V. Fox, *Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p. 193.

<sup>17</sup> See William W. Hallo and J.J.A. van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 1968. *Genji Monogatari* – the first romantic tale ever written – was authored by Japanese novelist and court lady Murasaki Shikibu (c.973–c.1014).

<sup>18</sup> Yisrael Shalem, “History of Jerusalem from Its Beginning to David”, in Yisrael Shalem and David Eisenstadt, *Jerusalem: Life Throughout the Ages in a Holy City*, Ramat-Gan, Ingeborg Rennert Center for Jerusalem Studies, 1997, [https://www.biu.ac.il/JS/rennert/history\\_2.html](https://www.biu.ac.il/JS/rennert/history_2.html).

Even Christianity underwent continuous contamination as it expanded from the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe. During this process, it took on numerous spatio-architectural practices,<sup>19</sup> – such as the “Gothic style”, adopted to build many cathedrals in Europe (but also castles, palaces and town halls) – and cultural customs, including traditions typical of pre-Christian Europe that form the basis of some key aspects of the Christmas and Easter holidays.<sup>20</sup> Like all the themes and aspects mentioned in this paper, religions are thus the result of human “accumulation”: a process which unfolded in each and every shore of the Mediterranean, deeply entangling and connecting them.

### Unlearning

The analysis started by asking how one can decolonise Euro-Mediterranean relations. From the perspective of a historian, the first needed element is a willingness to acknowledge and place (also) the “Mediterranean others” at centre stage, not least to better understand “ourselves” (Europe) and the fluid world we inhabit. All this will require, first and foremost, a process of “unlearning” and the will to question well established Eurocentric scholarly traditions. It is indeed necessary

<sup>19</sup> The Gothic style “arose out of a succession of influences that started in the Middle East and Muslim Andalusia, blending with the earlier extant Byzantine and Romanesque styles; it was a creative combination, a synthesis”. See Diana Darke, *Stealing from the Saracens. How Islamic Architecture Shaped Europe*, London, Hurst, 2020, p. 59.

<sup>20</sup> See Mark Juergensmeyer (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Global Religions*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006.



to unlearn in order to relearn, to deconstruct in order to reconstruct. In Susan Buck-Morss's words: "The greater the specialization of knowledge, the more advanced the level of research, the longer and more venerable the scholarly tradition, the easier it is to ignore discordant facts".<sup>21</sup>

From the perspective of European states and the EU, decolonising Euro-Mediterranean relations should be intended as a call for humbleness, primarily in relation to the way many of their "progressive plans" are conceived and implemented. The most recent example, by far not an isolated case, comes from the EU Green Deal, a plan which, once more, effectively "overlooks" and exploits marginalised communities in the Southern Mediterranean and beyond.

How so? Demands for renewables in Europe require more extractivism in a number of African and other non-European countries. On top of this, the EU Green Deal does not recognise the "Global North" as the driver of climate change (it has been estimated that the US military, for instance, is a bigger polluter than more than 100 countries combined) and does not consider climate reparations, nor the role of corporate influence in damaging marginalised communities. Addressing "climate colonialism"<sup>22</sup> might indeed be a key element to start a concrete reset of Euro-Mediterranean relations, placing

these on a more balanced, sustainable and just plane.

22 July 2021

<sup>21</sup> See Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009, p. 22.

<sup>22</sup> See on this Myriam Douo, "Climate Colonialism and the EU's Green Deal", in *Al Jazeera*, 23 June 2021, <https://aje.io/rnvwvr>.

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